SETTLING FOR SECOND BEST
WHEN SHOULD DOCTORS AGREE TO PARENTAL DEMANDS FOR SUBOPTIMAL TREATMENT?

TARA NAIR¹  25175084 Supervisors: A/Prof Dominic Wilkinson², Prof Julian Savulescu², Dr Ryan Tonkens³

THE PROBLEM
Doctors sometimes encounter parents who object to prescribed treatment for their children and request suboptimal conventional alternatives.

These requested treatments may be more harmful or more expensive than the recommended treatment.

Existing literature examines refusal of treatment, particularly in life or death situations; however, the question of when a doctor ought to allow or override a parental request for an alternative has been left unanswered.

AIM

• To test the public’s intuitions regarding thresholds for acceptable harm and expense and assess the effect of the parents’ reason
• To appraise existing theoretical frameworks for parental freedom and compare them with our data

METHODS

• Online survey with a sample of the North American public
• Statistical analysis conducted on IBM SPSS Statistics
• Ethical analysis of existing frameworks
• Descriptive and normative outcomes were compared

RESULTS

242 survey respondents, 178 valid responses (73.6%)

Religiously motivated requests were significantly more likely to be allowed (p<0.001)

Figure 2. Level of agreement to provide alternative treatments of (a) reduced efficacy (b) increased expense

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

In our framework, the doctor should:
1. Assess the competency of the decision-maker
2. Assess the appropriateness of their reason
3. Measure the request against the fixed cost and harm thresholds

Reasons are not weighted but simply considered acceptable or not.

CONCLUSIONS

• The public was significantly more likely to refuse requests for treatment that were much less effective, or much more costly than the standard treatment.
• The public was more inclined to allow these requests if provided with a religious reason compared to a non-religious reason.
• Further research is needed to test our model and work towards ethically sound thresholds

1. Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University
2. Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, University of Oxford
3. Centre for Human Bioethics, Monash University

Neonatal Jacoplane, 1980, Photograph by Jacoplane, distributed under a CC BY-SA 3.0 license https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Neonatal_Jacoplane.jpg